

Swimmer's Itch

What is swimmer's itch?

Swimmer's itch is a skin rash caused by a parasite that ordinarily infects birds, semi-aquatic mammals and snails.

Who gets swimmer's itch?

About one-third of the people who come in contact with the parasite develop swimmer's itch. All people, especially children, who swim or wade in infested water may experience this itching rash. Swimmer's itch may occur among bathers in lakes in many parts of the world, including the Great Lakes region of North America and certain coastal beaches.

How is swimmer's itch spread?

An individual may get the infection by swimming or wading in infested water and then allowing water to evaporate off the skin rather than drying the skin with a towel. Various birds, muskrats and moles carry the parasite. These parasites are released from infected snails, travel through water and are capable of penetrating human skin. These parasites can cause an allergic reaction in some people. The parasite does not reproduce or cause any permanent infection.

What are the symptoms of swimmer's itch?

An initial tingling sensation may be felt. The irritated spot reaches its maximum size after 24 hours; the itching may continue for several days. Symptoms should disappear within a week.

How soon after exposure do the symptoms appear?

Symptoms may appear within one to two hours of exposure.

When and for how long is a person able to spread swimmer's itch?

Person-to-person spread does not occur.

Does past infection make a person immune?

No.

What are the complications associated with swimmer's itch?

A person's first exposure to infested water may not result in the itchy rash. Repeated exposure increases a person's allergic sensitivity to the parasite and increases the likelihood of rash development.

What is the treatment for swimmer's itch?

While all cases do not require treatment, some people may seek relief from itching by applying skin lotions or creams.

What can be done to prevent the spread of swimmer's itch?

Toweling off immediately after swimming or wading in infested water helps prevent rash. Swim in water away from the shore. Avoid swimming immediately after an onshore wind if the lake is having a problem with swimmer's itch. Avoid swimming in areas with snails. Don't encourage birds to stay near swimming areas by feeding them.

